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硕士学位论文

Power Discourse and Knowledge

—A Multi-perspective Reading of *Play It as It Lays*

权利 话语 知识

——《顺其自然》的多角度解读

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Abstract

Joan Didion is definitely one of the most famous contemporary writers and her masterpiece—*Play It as It Lays*, with its special yet poetic description of the spiritual “wasteland” of contemporary American society and its subtle yet profound depiction of the embarrassing situation of contemporary females, is canonized as the symbol of an age.

The novel itself is the chronicle of Maria’s mental breakdown. This thesis takes Foucault’s theory as the theoretical framework with three keywords, namely power, discourse and knowledge, trying to explore women’s marginal identity and their struggle in the society with a hope of getting deeper understanding on the mechanism of social power structure and the women’s situation.

The first chapter mainly deals with the power relation between Maria and her husband, Maria and her lovers, Maria and her female friend together with the maternal relationship, revealing Maria’s embarrassing situation within the patriarchal social power structure. Maria, as the victim of the society, is once again disappointed at her pursuit of happiness in mechanism of the social power structure. At the same time, she is gradually isolated and marginalized in society.

The second chapter devotes to the analysis of the discourse of Maria’s husband, the discourse of Maria’s lovers and friends, and Maria’s reticence. From the discursive practice, we find the practice and distribution of power. At the same time, we see the procedures of discourse production and the enhancement of power relation by discursive practice. Maria is controlled in the discursive practice; at last she has to stay in reticence.

The third chapter mainly deals with the knowledge of Maria’s madness and the living conditions of female characters. The production of knowledge is closely connected with power and discourse. Maria’s madness is also produced within the practice of power relation, with the redistribution and reorganization of discourse.

The conclusion part emphasizes that Maria’s confinement is not the result of her

behavior but pushed by the complex social power structure and her “madness” is not psychosis but the knowledge produced by the complex mechanism of social power structure through discursive practice. And this knowledge in turn enhances the power relation, maintaining the mechanism of social power structure.

Key words: power, discourse, knowledge

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摘要

琼·狄第恩无疑是美国当代不可忽略的女作家之一。她的代表作《顺其自然》以其独特的笔触对美国当代社会思想的“荒原”做了大胆而又诗意的描绘，对美国当代女性的生活困境进行了细致而又有深度的刻画。该小说因此而成为美国当代社会的一个标志性符号。

在小说中，女主人公玛利亚精神失常的过程是贯穿全文的主线。本文以福柯的理论作为文本考察的框架，以权力，话语和知识三个关键词作为切入点剖析小说中女性的社会处境，揭示女性的边缘地位和在社会中的挣扎，以求能对当代女性及社会机制得出更深刻的理解。

第一章主要分析了女主人公玛利亚和丈夫、父亲、情人、朋友以及母女之间的权力关系，揭示了在父权盛行的权力结构机制里玛利亚的尴尬处境。作为受害者的玛利亚在社会权力机制中对幸福的追寻只能一次又一次的化为泡影，自己也一次次的被社会所隔离和边缘化。

第二章主要分析了玛利亚的丈夫，情人，朋友的话语及玛利亚的沉默。从话语实践的层面分析了权力的运行和分配对玛利亚的影响，同时分析了话语自身在权力关系中的作用以及话语实践对权力关系的强化。玛利亚在话语实践中受到控制和约束，最后只能“消声”而陷入沉默状态。

第三章主要分析玛利亚的“疯癫”以及小说中女性的生存状态。知识的生产在福柯的理论框架中是和权力以及话语息息相关的。玛利亚的“疯癫”也是在与权力关系的实践中产生，并通过话语的重构和意义的赋予而形成的。

结语部分强调，玛利亚的精神失常不是个人的原因，而是复杂的社会权力机制的产物。她的“疯癫”也绝非病理意义上的精神疾病，而是由复杂的权力话语机制生产出来的知识。这种绝非中立的知识反过来又强化现存的权力关系，继而维持盛行的权力结构机制。

关键词：权力，话语，知识

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Introduction

No decade can be captured with a single sentence, and this is certainly true of the 1960s. The trauma of World War II was still haunting the writers of “the lost generation” who struggled to develop their concepts to make sense of this world strenuously. The later generation was put to the fore of the stage with the “lost” in a more significant sense. They had to live in a society whose “materialistic and pleasuring-seeking value lack the moral dimension provided by traditional institution” (Henderson 19). *Play It as It Lays* was born just over this period, bearing the traumas and traces definitely belong to it.

Before the publication of *Play It as It Lays*, Joan Didion had already enjoyed “an enviable underground reputation” (Duffy 75) as a journalist. It is this novel that brings her reputation as a novelist to the surface. The novel is an immediate success and wins great attention from the literary circle, becoming the best-seller right after its publication. John Leonard, a commentator of *The New York Times*, praises this novel in his review: “there hasn’t been another American writer of Joan Didion’s quality since Nathanael West” (33). He continues, “She writes with a razor, carving her characters out of her perceptions with strokes so swift and economical that each scene ends almost before the reader is aware of it; and yet the characters go on bleeding afterwards”(33). Many scholars devote their efforts to the exploration of this novel which can be roughly divided into several perspectives.

First and foremost, many scholars focus on the literary perspective: genre, narrative style, technique, social significance and comparison with previous literature etc. Richard Schickel comments that “*Play It as It Lays* is a Hollywood novel in the same peripheral sense *The Day of the Locust* is, attacking the subject with the indirection of art rather than the directness of commerce” (101). David Geherin further extends the study of this novel from this perspective, declaring that:

Hollywood as metaphor for everything that is tawdry, artificial, and superficial about

America has become a cliché in contemporary fiction. Those novels about Hollywood which are still read—West's *The Day of the Locust*, Mailer's *The Deer Park*, Fitzgerald's *The Last Tycoon*, Schulberg's *What Makes Sammy Run?*—succeed by transcending the limitations of their subject matter...Joan Didion's *Play It as It Lays* belongs to that group of novels which enlarges upon the limited nature of its material. (Geherin 64)

He further studies how the novel “depends upon an intimate connection between setting and theme...a picture of personal dread and anxiety, of alienation and absurdity lurking within and without” (Geherin 64). Later, Fracasso explores the diverse techniques this “shocking story” employed more specifically from four perspectives: “forceful diction to portray the gradual dehumanization of her central character, dramatic irony to highlight her confused thinking and mindless acts, explicit imagery to expose the desolation of the landscape, and striking symbolism to reveal the breakdown of traditional values” (153). Through all these variety of techniques, he concludes that “Didion uses Maria to achieve a sense of balance in the narrative” (160).

The theme of the novel also drew attentions from some critics. Dollard comments in his article: “as in her first two books, Didion is concerned with the theme of social disintegration” (65). Geherin, in his study, compares Didion's narrative technique with that of Eliot's, concluding that: “... [the novel] recalls Eliot's line from *The Waste Land*, ‘A heap of broken image’, images of alienation and desolation, fragments of banal conversations, the minutiae of everyday life joined in a mosaic of nothingness...what emerges through Didion's careful selection and rendering is a bleak and haunting picture of nothingness” (77). Simard also says in his study that “...[The novel] is unquestionably a study of the modern malaise and an exploration of the futility of existence in a crumbling and decadent society” (273). Yet he gets a totally different conclusion from that of Geherin's. According to Simard,

[Maria] is a very specialized case; she is an intelligent and sensitive woman, a type of

human being who is quickly aware of the complexities and metaphysics of ordinary existence...her victimization is not due to society, but to herself. She is primarily the victim of her own ego weakness and her suffering is largely self-inflicted; she is, in terms of contemporary psychoanalytic practice, a narcissistic personality. (273)

It seems that the conclusions of these critics are conflicting. In my opinion, both of them are necessary because they focus on different perspectives of analysis with different analytic methods.

It is through psychoanalytic analysis that Simard gets the conclusion on Maria's narcissistic personality, which becomes the core of his study. The symptom he ascribed to Maria is that "a basic but false sense of superiority provides her with a comfortable distance from others, who seem to her only offer the possibility of more pain, but she distances herself from herself in the process, losing touch with people, friends, her environment, and finally herself" (289). As a psychoanalyst, he writes Maria a prescription: "only when Maria allows aspects of the self to reach consciousness can she finally begin to expose herself, be vulnerable, and accept the fact that she cannot reduce her life to a series of abstractions" (289).

Loris contributes to the studies of this novel from the myth and archetypal perspective. In her book, she carefully exposes that "as a type of spiritual experience, Maria's sojourn into the desert is echoed throughout the Old and New Testament in stories of Eve's children: in Israel's forty years of wandering, in Elijah's forty days of searching, in Jesus' forty days of testing" (43). In her study, she takes Maria's forty days driving experience in the desert as "the symbolic meaning of the desert as a place of exile, testing, and understanding" (44). In a broader sense, the novel itself becomes "her modern and ironic account of the story of the Fall and Eve's exile from the Eden" (44).

Next is the study of this novel from cultural perspective. Katherine Henderson in her *Joan Didion* shrewdly reveals to us that Maria's philosophy, which is derived from her father and consisting two maxims, is "a perversion of the religious belief of early Americans...the [first] belief is a trivial secularization of the positive side of the

original American dream: the sense of God's special covenant with Americans...the [second] is a secularization of the dark side of the American religious heritage, the Calvinistic sense of lurking evil" (20-21). Wolff comments on Henderson's study, concluding that Henderson broadens our understanding of the novel for she makes it clear that this novel deals with "... [American] inheritance from the 'fathers', and it is typical of Didion's compression that this theme embraces both the whole set of ideals that Americans identify with 'Fathers'—puritan fathers, founding fathers—and the literal legacy of Harry Wyeth to his daughter" (482). Wolff explores further from this perspective, concluding that "the novel ransacks American culture, searching for some viable moral/aesthetic strategy" (487). In her opinion, "Didion demands that we use Maria's agonized explorations as a vehicle for the examination of nothing less than our heritage as Americans. The tensions in this work...are always between past and present—Maria's past and present, and the past and present of a once-great culture" (481).

With the growing prominence of Didion, some Chinese scholars also turn to the study of her novel from various perspectives. Young scholar Li Meihua devotes her doctoral dissertation to the explorations of "the multi-perspective representations of new journalism, feminism and postmodernism in Joan Didion's works". Wang Haimeng, a doctoral candidate, also writes an article exploring the nothingness experienced by individuals in the postmodern simulation context with Jean Baudrillard's notions of implosion and of the end of history as the theoretical basis, concluding that "this paper believes that the novel, by setting the story in Hollywood and Las Vegas, foregrounds the hyper-reality of post modern society, and its special treatment of time and space corresponds to Baudrillard's supposition of the end of history. Thus this novel reveals that the subjective existence is illusory and eternal void is the fatal strategy" (115).

All these studies are insightful and meaningful. My thesis is greatly indebted to all the studies mentioned above. But in my view, the protagonist—Maria's very situation within and without her family, the dynamic relationship between Maria and other characters, the discourse of Maria and others and

the-seemed-apparent-knowledge of Maria are not paid enough attention. This thesis will not repeat what the former critics have done but make a multi-perspective study of this novel from the perspectives of power, discourse and knowledge, bearing a two-fold aim: to shed some light on this novel, especially concerning the female protagonist's position in society, with the central concepts of power, discourse and knowledge as theoretical framework; and more significantly, to apply Foucault's theory to a vivid example of contemporary situation.

The framework of this thesis is based on these three concepts which are taken from Foucault's theory. Foucault is one of the most prominent philosophers in the 20th century. His "critique of modernity and humanism, along with his proclamation of the 'death of man' and development of new perspectives on society, knowledge, discourse and power, has made him a major source of postmodern thought" (Best & Kellner 34). In his studies of psychiatry, medicine, punishment, criminology, the emergence of the human sciences, the formation of various disciplinary apparatuses, he draws upon the theory from Nietzsche, Bataille and Marx etc., forming his own theory and proposing that an interface between modern forms of power, discourse and knowledge has served to create new forms of domination.

Early in the 1970s, Foucault began to rethink the nature of modern power. In his scheme, all the power anchored in macrostructures and ruling class and repressive in nature should be rejected. He develops the modern power in "non-totaling, non-representational and anti-humanist" way as "dispersed, indeterminate, homeomorphous, subjectless and productive, constituting individual's bodies and identities" (49). In his opinion, Marx's economic model of power is flawed by its assumptions as a "reductionistic subordination of power to class domination and economic imperatives" (49). The nature of power should be productive rather than repressive. Against Marx's theory that power operates through physical force and representation by law, Foucault proposed that the power operates through the hegemony of norms, political technologies and the shaping of body and soul.

What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it

doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression. (*Power/Knowledge* 119)

The mechanism and operation of power make possible the discourse and knowledge. On the other hand, "discourse and their related disciplines and institutions are functions of power: they distribute the effects of power" (Bove 58). Discourse, in Foucault's opinion, "is the organized and regulated, as well as the regulating and constituting, functions of language that it studies: its aim is to describe the surface linkages between power, knowledge, institutions, intellectuals, the control of populations, and the modern state as these intersect in the functions of systems of thought" (Bove 54). Discourse produces knowledge—the knowledge on humans and the society.

Knowledge, as the "truth" of these discourses, is "relative to the frame of reference which contains them...[is] a function of these frames...these discourses constitute the [knowledge] they claim to discover and transmit" (56). As for the relationship between knowledge and power, Foucault is totally "against modern theories that see knowledge as neutral and objective or emancipatory, he emphasizes that knowledge is indissociable from regimes of power" (Best & Kellner 50). "Knowledge and power are integrated with one another, and there is no point in dreaming of a time when knowledge will cease to depend on power; this is just a way of reviving humanism in a utopian guise. It is not possible for power to be excised without knowledge, it is impossible for knowledge not to engender power" (*Power/Knowledge* 52).

Thus, we can see power, discourse and knowledge are interrelating with each other. The operation of power makes possible the discourse and knowledge. Discourse produces knowledge, helping the formation of power. Knowledge is indissociable from the discourse and power. Although in this thesis, I make my study of the novel

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